

Historical Note on Gakkhars and Slave Trade in Early Modern India

The area between the two rivers Indus and Jhelum that is traditionally associated with Gakkhars has been ravaged by invaders from the north-west for hundreds of years. During the era of the Delhi sultanate and even in later times, this area was considered the frontier of India and was treated as such by whosoever held power in Delhi [1]. This might be one of the reasons that for extended durations, Gakkhars were able to exercise absolute power in their territory with only nominal allegiance to the central authority.

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The geographical location of the Gakkhar territory and the extended areas in which Gakkhars held sway during the late medieval and early modern India was a deciding factor that enabled them to operate as intermediaries in political and military affairs of the time. This intermediary role also expanded into trade and commerce and it must have affected other more mundane affairs of everyday existence. The participation of the Gakkhar elite in slave trade is one example of this expansion.

Slaves from India were considered a valuable commodity in Central Asia, required in large numbers to manage the plantation-style farms of the Central Asian aristocracy or other wealthy families. Slaves were not only captured during military campaigns but free men, women, and children were forced into slavery through coercion, abduction, and all sorts of illegal means. Slave trade was a lucrative business that continued for hundreds of years through the north-west frontier of India. This business increased in magnitude during and after the Muslim domination of the subcontinent. Indian slaves of various categories ranging from ordinary laborer to skilled artisan continued to be transported to the Central Asian slave markets on a regular basis [2].

One mode of the slave trade in India involved the caravan merchants who either bought them for export or received them in exchange for goods in demand. During the Mughal rule, one valuable commodity was the Central Asian horse, imported regularly in large numbers for use by the highly mobile cavalry of the Mughal army. There is evidence that Gakkhars mediated the trade of these horses in exchange for slaves captured in India [2]. This evidence comes from the memoirs of the Jesuit missionary Antonio Monserrate who accompanied emperor Akbar (1542-1605) and his army in 1581 while passing through the Gakkhar territory. The emperor was on his way to Kabul to subdue his half-brother who had revolted with the assistance of the Afghan chieftains. Antonio Monserrate noted that Gakkhars have followed the practice of enslaving men travelling through their territory. In the vicinity of the modern day town of Rawat (Islamabad), he came face to face with those Gakkhar chiefs who had most likely gathered to

pay homage to the emperor. He described them as fierce and war-like and attributed the curious adage 'slaves from India, horses from Parthia' to them on account of their indulgence in the slave trade focused on acquiring the best Central Asian horses [3].

Almost 100 years before Monserrate's interaction with the Gakkhars, another missionary had a different type of experience while passing through their territory. Shamsu'd-Din Muhammad Araki, a Muslim missionary from Iran visited Kashmir in 1483 for the first time. He was travelling from Multan to Kashmir and it has been reported in his biography that he passed through Dangali, a Gakkhar stronghold before entering Kashmir. This biography was probably written in the early part of the second half of the 16th century [4]. It has been further noted by the biographer that Araki bought a slave by the name of Maulana Bayezid for domestic service in Dangali [5]. It is worth pointing out that the place referred to as Dangali in the biography of Araki is not the modern day village of Dhangali (Kallar Syedan), which remained the de facto capital of the parganah of Dangali for hundreds of years. It is probably the general area of Dangali that has been referred to as the Gakkhar territory. Dangali was first reported as a parganah in the Ain-i-Akbari during the later part of the second half of the 16th century [6]. This parganah extended from the areas adjoining the present-day village of Dhangali up to the now inundated village Sultanpur (Dina), its eastern boundary defined by the river Jhelum. The area identified as Dangali is of much older disposition and held by the Gakkhars from the early period of the Delhi sultanate [7, 8]. Araki's purchase of a domestic in Dangali indicates that the practice of trading in slaves was common in Gakkhar territories and existed even before the infamous adage quoted in the preceding paragraph became popular.

References

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